

'Truth commission' urges change in conscientious-objector status

by [Bob Allen](#)

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WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A coalition of more than 60 religious, veterans, academic and advocacy groups called on the United States military Nov. 10 to extend conscientious-objector status to soldiers who believe a specific war is immoral.

The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America is one of 61 co-sponsors of a Truth Commission on Conscience of War that [released](#) its [report](#) at the National Press Club in Washington. A public presentation on Veterans Day was scheduled at a 7 p.m. interfaith worship [service](#) at National City Christian Church Nov. 11 followed by a daylong "[teach-in](#)" on "selective conscientious objection" Nov. 12.

Ken Sehested, founding director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, represented the group as a commissioner at [hearings](#) March 21 at Riverside Church in New York. Commissioners heard testimony from soldiers and expert witnesses on the difficulty of getting the military to release soldiers who develop conscientious objections during their participation in war.

Current military policy, which has not been changed since the draft era of the Vietnam War, [defines](#) a conscientious objector as one with "a firm, fixed, and sincere objection to participation in war in any form or the bearing of arms, by reason of religious training and/or belief."

Objector status, recognized since the Civil War, originally applied to members of certain religious groups known for their pacifist beliefs, such as Quakers and Mennonites. The Supreme Court [expanded](#) the definition in 1971 to include not only members of specified religious traditions, but also anyone with "deeply held beliefs that

cause them to oppose participation in war in any form."

The truth commission pointed out that the current exemption still applies only to pacifists, a small minority among Christians, while leaving out those in the "just-war" tradition embraced by the vast majority of Christians.

The commission called on the nation's leaders to revise Department of Defense regulations on conscientious objection "to respect the moral teachings of just war and religious and philosophical traditions that adhere to just-war criteria."

Just-war teaching -- in use since the writings of Augustine of Hippo in the fourth and fifth centuries -- acknowledges that war is sometimes a necessary evil but outlines strict conditions for it to be legitimate on moral grounds. While stated in different ways, basic criteria for determining if a war is just include that it be a last resort, have a high probability of success and that there be proportionality between the good it aims to achieve and the evil that it inflicts.

While the military teaches just-war philosophy, current policy does not allow individual soldiers to withdraw from a particular war based on the same moral criteria.

That contradiction, the coalition said, "denies freedom of religious practice and the exercise of moral conscience to those serving in the military."

Modeled after a commission formed in South Africa after the fall of apartheid, the Truth Commission on Conscience of War cited high suicide rates among veterans as evidence of the "moral injury" suffered by soldiers forced to continue fighting a war they determine to be immoral.

A common perception holds that in today's all-volunteer military there is no need to expand regulations for conscientious objection. The commission noted, however, that for many soldiers "conscientious objection" is not part of their vocabulary until they see first-hand something morally wrong in their actions and the conduct of the war. A

total 425 service members sought such "selective conscientious objection" between 2002 and 2006, and about half of those were denied.

Sehested, now co-pastor of [Circle of Mercy Congregation](#) in Asheville, N.C., said he believes the "most hopeful contribution" of the broad coalition is that it will bring groups traditionally polarized between pacifist and just-war traditions to the table for "a new national conversation about the cost and character of modern warfare."

Sehested said that type of collaboration, referred to "[just peacemaking](#)" in a 1998 [book](#) edited by Baptist ethicist Glen Stassen, "allows people of different moral horizons to share the road, and bear the load, for the things that make for peace."